THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

Inescapable God
January 16, 2000
John M. Buchanan

Everybody can be great. Because anybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve. You don't have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve, you don't have to know Einstein's theory of thermodynamics in physics to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love.

Martin Luther King, Jr.
The Words of Martin Luther King, Jr.

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago
126 East Chestnut Street, Chicago, IL 60611-2094
(312) 787-4570

INESCAPABLE GOD

JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
January 16,2000

Psalm 139: 1-12
1 Samuel 3: 1-10
John 1: 43-51

"If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall . . . hold me fast." (Psalm 139: 9,10)

Presbyterian theologian and elder statesman, Robert McAfee Brown wrote a personal statement of faith one time in which he said that "there are little moments when vast things happen."

At a critical time in my life I happened upon two pieces of writing that made all the difference in the world. It was a dry time spiritually. I had made a very tentative vocational commitment by enrolling in Divinity School, but now it was time either to move ahead with some degree of intentionality and certainty or find something else to do. I longed for a sign, a voice, a personal assurance that this was God's will, or at least a pretty good idea. I got nothing. I looked for answers in text books, I read and studied and wrote, trying as hard as I knew how, to establish some sense that I was on the right track: that there was a God who cared about matters as mundane as how to earn a living and support a family for several decades. What praying I did was pretty much in the form of an inquiry: "Anybody there? Anybody listening? Anybody care?"

And, for some reason, my mother chose that moment to send me a poem that was, she wrote, one of her favorites. She thought I might like it. I don't know if it's very good poetry. But it has an arresting title and it not only captured my imagination, but changed the way I think.

Francis Thompson's, "The Hound of Heaven:"

"I fled Him, down the nights and down
the days;
I fled Him down the arches of the years;
I fled Him down the labyrinthine ways
of my own mind; and in the midst of tears
I hid from Him, and under running laughter,
Up vistaed hopes I sped
and shot, precipitated,
Adown Titanic glooms of chasamed fears
From those strong feet that followed,
followed after."

There is, in that poem, a notion of God and of our relationship with God that was quite unlike anything I had ever heard before. My assumption was that God existed somewhere "up" or "out" there, if not in a literal heaven with golden gates and streets of pearl, then in some far recess of the universe, or perhaps in a mysterious dimension of existence inaccessible to our human perceptions. Furthermore, my theological assumptions, such as they were, included God interceding dramatically in history and in the lives of other people. But in moments of candor, I was deeply suspicious because, frankly, nothing like that had ever happened to me. No voices in the dark calling my name, no bolt from the blue knocking me down with a sure sense of God.

Overall, my assumption was that God was a mystery, a good mystery, and our human task, maybe even the highest human task, was to seek God, pursue God, to try to find God.

And then I encountered this poem with its astonishing assertion that sometimes human beings flee from God and that God actually pursues and follows human beings—"down the nights and down the days, down the arches of the years." That is a very different God from the much safer and predictable deity who sits in isolated splendor waiting for us to seek and pursue and find. This is a God who takes the initiative in the divine-human encounter and actually comes after us.

It wasn't long after I received that poem that I encountered the second writing, the 139th Psalm. I'm not sure how I had missed it before—sitting through all those weekly responsive readings in church, but there it was again, a suggestion that God seeks and finds us, and that there is nowhere we can go, either accidentally or purposely running from God, trying to avoid God, that will take us out of the range of God's presence and mercy and care.

> "Where can I go from your spirit?
> Or where can I flee from your
> presence?
> If I ascend to heaven, you are there; . . ."

I discovered Psalm 139 in an introductory survey course in Old Testament. For the most part, religion in ancient Israel was a corporate activity. God created a nation, formed a people. Individuality in the Old Testament is a matter of belonging to the community: that's what the Law of Moses is about—how to live as God's community. It's all corporate, except, the professor told us, for the Psalter—which is the place in ancient Israel where the individual emerges and shines. Many of the Psalms are personal—"The Lord is my shepherd . . . I lift my eyes to the hills, from whence does my help come." Psalm 139 is intensely personal, an intimate confession of a person whose life-long relationship with God was a result of God's persistence, God's search and pursuit, and ultimate finding of the individual.

Again, that is a very different idea of God, one that puts religion in a whole different light. Instead of the human pursuit of God, religion becomes the activity, the place and way human beings respond to God's initiative.

That is a theme that appears throughout the Bible. In one of our oldest stories, God comes to a young boy, Samuel, and it is in a voice in the dark. Only Samuel doesn't recognize the voice. He thinks it is the voice of the old priest Eli, with whom he is living and apprenticing. 'Samuel,' the voice says, and Samuel gets up from his bed and goes to Eli. Three times it happens: the voice says his name, Samuel thinks it is Eli calling. The third time Eli, who now suspects that the voice is actually God, tells Samuel to answer. The initiative is all God's and God's wonderful persistence. It takes four tries to get Samuel's attention, and the sense of the story is that God will stay at it as long as it takes. Old Eli's role, the priest's role, interestingly, is not to be the voice of God, but simply to suggest that Samuel might try listening to the voice calling his name, an interesting paradigm for professional ministry—instead of preaching, helping people hear the voice of God calling their names in the middle of their lives.

Does any of that sound familiar to you? We Presbyterians are not very good at talking about our personal religious experiences. We're far better at discussing ideas about God than describing personal experiences of God. And, as far as conversion, a topic Martin Marty recently described as "one of the most private acts in life . . . which occurs in the deepest recesses of the heart . . . ," we aren't at all comfortable talking about it.

And the reason is that for many of us, at least, we cannot pinpoint a time or date, there was no singular moment, but rather a life-time of moments, a long and slow process, both hot and cold, including times of certainty and times of doubt. Psalm 139 suggests that our conversion is, in fact, a process, and that God has been pursuing us across the years.

When Bob and Dalia Baker joined a team of missionaries from many different denominations in Tirana, Albania, Bob was asked when he accepted Jesus Christ as his personal Lord and Savior. Bob's answer was pure Presbyterianism. He couldn't remember a day in his life when Jesus was not his Lord, Bob said.

People who think and reflect about their religious experience are helpful. Writer Anne Lamott describes it in terms of a slow, gradual return to church and faith out of a life that was falling apart at the seams, standing outside a little Presbyterian church, looking in, listening to the singing, one day stepping through the door and acknowledging that God had been pushing, nudging, prodding. Finally she said simply, " 'I quit.'" Actually she punctuated it with an earthy phrase that is not "pulpit friendly." "I took a long breath and said out loud, 'All right, you can come in now.'" (*Traveling Mercies, Some Thoughts on Faith,* p.50)

Kathleen Norris, raised in the faith, but self-exiled from it for years of seeking, searching, dabbling here and there and finally, returned to her family's farm and went to church in Lemmon, South Dakota, writes: "I came to understand that God hadn't lost me, even if I seemed for years to have misplaced God." (*Amazing Grace,* p.104) Kathleen says that suspicion of religion ran so deep in her that she feared conversion, thinking it might silence her as a writer. She credits several unconscious mentors who nudged her gently, without even knowing they were doing it. But her observation that God had not forgotten her even though for years she seemed to have misplaced God, sounded familiar. Or, as someone said, "If you don't feel as close to God as you used to, who do you supposed moved?"

Perhaps it's because it sounds so familiar, but Frederick Buechner's story is my favorite. It's in a book he wrote years ago entitled, *The Sacred Journey*. Life, according to Buechner, any life, his or yours or mine, is a sacred journey into which God speaks and comes. That's what makes it sacred.

Buechner's was not a church family. What religion he had came in bits and pieces from occasional visits with grandparents. After college, he taught English for a while, joined the army, and ended up in New York trying to be a writer and discovering that he could not write a word. He tried a number of options, including a love affair that failed.

He wrote, "Every door I tried to open slammed on my foot. It all sounds like a kind of farce when I try to set it down . . .Part of the farce was that for the first time in my life that year in New York, I started to go to church regularly, and what was farcical about it was not that I went, but my reason for going, which was simply that on the block where I lived there happened to be a
church . . . and I had nothing all that much better to do with my lonely Sunday . . ."

I can't improve on the way Buechner tells it.

The church wasMadison Avenue Presbyterian Church. The minister was a man named George Buttrick. Sunday after Sunday Buechner went. "It was not just his eloquence that kept me coming back." He writes:

> "What drew me more was whatever it was that his sermons came from and whatever it was in me that they touched so deeply. And then there came one particular sermon with one particular phrase in it that does not even appear in a transcript of his words that somebody sent me more than twenty-five years later so I can only assume that he must have dreamed it up at the last minute and liked it—and on just such foolish, tenuous, holy threads as that, I suppose, hang the destinies of all of us. Jesus Christ is King, Buttrick said, because again and again he is crowned in the heart of the people who believe in him. And that inward coronation takes place, Buttrick said, among confession, and tears, and great laughter.
>
> It was the phrase 'great laughter,' that did it, did whatever it was that I believe must have been hiddenly in the doing all the years of my journey up till then. It was not so much that a door opened as that I suddenly found that a door had been open all along which I had only just then stumbled upon." (p.108/109)
>
> "Where can I go from your spirit?
> Or where can I flee from your presence?

And so, just on the outside chance that you may be fleeing from God, living your life in what seems to be a normal, ordinary way, but is actually a way of holding God at arm's length, this idea of God's persistent pursuit should be at least tantalizing.

And if your life is so full; full of job and family and complicated relationships, professional demands and tight schedules, your bosses' expectations which regularly exceed the number of hours in the day, and long days with no time for leisurely lunches or even pleasant human conversation, not to mention praying, you just might find intriguing the ancient suggestion contained in these words:

> "You know when I sit down and when I rise up,
> You discern my thoughts from afar."

And the next time you have to hurry to catch a plane after a busy day and a stressful trip to the airport, fighting crowds, escalators, ticket counter, falling into your seat and, after the irritatingly inevitable wait out there at the far reaches of O'Hare finally take off, and reaching cruising altitude of 33,000 feet, you might find interesting and comforting and maybe even provocative, these ancient words:

> "If I ascend to heaven, you are
> there.
> If I take the wings of the morning
> and settle at the farthest limits of the
> sea,
> even there your hand shall hold
> me fast."

And tonight, or tomorrow night, when you fall exhausted into bed, you might be intrigued by:

> "You search out my path
> and my lying down."

And if your life can only be described as hellish: if nothing is working, if it all seems tragically empty and lonely, if relationships are sour and work is boring—and there is no light on the horizon—no promise, no hope—hear these words:

> "If I make my bed in Sheol," which is another word for hell, "You are there."

And if you find yourself thinking a lot about your own finiteness, if the recent death of a loved one, a close call, a dreaded lab report, the worst diagnosis you could imagine, if you find yourself thinking about what someone called "the insult of our mortality," hear these words which I think should be the very last words any of us is privileged to hear:

> "If I say, 'Surely the darkness
> shall cover me
> and the light around me become
> night,
> even the darkness is not dark
> to you;
> the night is as bright as the day,
> for darkness is as light to you.'"

"He fumbles at your spirit," Emily Dickinson wrote.

And Frederick Buechner, again:

> "What I found was what I had already half seen, or less than half, in many places over my twenty-seven years without ever clearly knowing what it was I was seeing or even that I was seeing anything of great importance. Something in me recoils from using such language, but here at the end I am left with no other way of saying it than what I finally found was Christ. Or was found. It hardly seems to matter which." (p. 110)

I love that tiny vignette in the first chapter of John—John's different version of the call of the disciples, Philip and Nathaniel. Nathaniel is, apparently tending to his own affairs, living his life, going to work, paying his bills, taking care of business—and Jesus sees him and approaches him, and Nathaniel says—"How do you know me?" and Jesus says simply, "I saw you under the fig tree."

That, I submit, is how it happens and how it is. Into our lives Christ comes. Into our lives God speak our names, doing what we do, sitting where we sit . . . and waits, doesn't force the issue; speaks our name and waits as long as it takes . . . for our response, our faith, our trust, our love, our 'yes.'

> "If I take the wings of the
> morning,
> and settle at the farthest limit of
> the sea,
> even then your hand shall lead me,
> and your right hand shall hold me
> fast."

Amen.